

**Rage Against the Dying of the Light:**

## Reimagining the Reality of University Academic Freedom Towards a Sustainable Society in the Philippines

*Honor and excellence.*

As a student at one of the premier state universities in the Philippines, these two words have long been ingrained into our mindset. They say honor should come first before excellence because integrity is indispensable in the pursuit of glory. As scholars of the country, it is our responsibility to continue improving ourselves to be the cream of the crop in our field and serve the nation with utmost patriotism and righteousness. In my first years of college, I have demonstrated this by partaking in a few protests on my own, may it be climate strikes, phaseout protests, or even lightning rallies. There was nothing more rewarding than being able to get in touch with the masses to whom I owe the gift of my education. For some time, I also served the student council as an institute representative and learned the ropes of student politics before the pandemic struck. It was during the onset of this global deluge when academic commitments began to take over, and I, along with many students, were resorted to other forms of demonstrations. Students were forced to brave outdoors to let their voice be heard in the hellscape of corruption as the system fail to heed to their qualms of academic freedom, with the state's red-tagging added fuel to fire. And as it happened, I watched as the numbers slowly dwindled—with student leaders stepping down, and more people apprehended from harmless initiatives just so they wouldn't be branded as terrorists. The privileged became more apathetic while the less fortunate feared. Fast forward to the present, even as I received my university's highest and most prestigious student award, it never felt enough because I knew the real struggle has always been outside the four walls of our classroom. The fighting spirit was always there, but it never thoroughly blazed across the people who needed it the most.

Although radical movements aren't the only way to advocate policy change and raising awareness, they are integral to urging and promoting discussions of social change. For a university with a renowned history of student activism, there has been a drastic decline of student involvement. For nearly a decade now, there has been a dismal turnout at campus elections in my university, barely breaching half the student body population (Santos, 2023). And unfortunately, this isn't an isolated case worldwide as we see lower voter turnout despite having high political engagement (Williams, 2020). While my professors and instructors actively encourage students by giving thought-provoking texts and implementing subjects like National Service Training Programs in the curriculum as mandated by Republic Act No. 9163, the fear stems from the lack of protection once we practice these values outside campus. Countless of students have worked for, campaigned, lobbied, and mobilized different causes, but the fight against injustice and

oppression is not something to be left only to the students. So how do we achieve excellence when we struggle to remain a bastion of academic freedom? How are we expected to uphold honor into helping ourselves, then our countrymen, while the system leaves us for dead?

See there are several factors interplaying here. First, while we acknowledge the agency of students to contribute to creating impactful changes, it is also ideal to guide them in organizing themselves for a common purpose e.g., forming a coalition. There are dozens of student organizations that exist within universities that serve a variety of agendas, interests, and purposes which may result to a fragmented engagement and limit the depth of their involvement into causes. Based on personal experience on handling different org events, the partnership responsibilities usually fall under gaining social media clout and less of immersing into the events' purposes, which make the impact of their advocacies essentially diluted. Fortunately, the multicultural environment of college encourages the exploration of different social issues. It's a challenge to individually reassure thousands of scholars of varying backgrounds, but it is possible to understand each other as one student body with our shared goal to uplift each other and alleviate the people above our own interest. On this note, effective coalitions must give way to genuine networks that support diverse exchange of ideas and resources as they can reach a larger audience. Hands-on participation can be achieved through action-oriented obligations like providing manpower, instead of simply spreading the word. While it is good to demand for systematic change within our institution, this is a time-consuming process. Taking advantage of the system and advocating for its improvement are two ventures that can coexist together. Hence, coalitions should opt to utilize existing university structures to accelerate the implementation of their projects and spotlight them through non-industrial platforms as means for increasing student engagement.

The principle that coalitions emphasizes is the mandatory collective representation of students in public spheres of decision-making. However, a disappointing yet prevailing practice in university governing bodies is tokenistic participation wherein student representation is being afforded minimal concessions in decision-making (Patrick, 2022). While one may suggest that this is the role of university student councils, because of the perceived ineffectiveness of student leaders, there's been less and less students partaking in student politics (Williams, 2020). One way to go about this is for student councils or parties to establish a university-wide flagship event which brings out the essence of the institution's principles. It is important this event resonate with the masses and of their lived experiences, and that the message is reechoed across our student communities. But what would guarantee student involvement is offering a variety of engagement options that cater to different skills. A hypothetical example would be on Disaster Risk Reduction and Management programs, wherein science students who

investigate physical processes and predict hazards can work with social science students assess into the relationship of people to places which is a vital aspect of risk management. In the same situation, creative-centered orgs can tap into arts as a platform as an emerging, favored approach for science communication in formal and informal settings (Lesen, 2016). This ties back to the multipartite nature of coalitions: by using our differences, we can come together towards the same goal. If scholastic achievements receive scholarships, grants, and internships (Corrigall-Brown, 2016), social movements should be regarded to the same degree. More efforts should be underway to support students in their programs to maximize their potential.

Even if students are already doing their best to actively engage in dialogue with university administrators and other stakeholders to express their concerns for a more socially impactful institution, the university must also act into prioritizing student welfare. This includes addressing the inaction on the attacks against student activists. In the Philippines, numerous cases of unjust prosecution and harassment towards National Democratic Mass Organizations, (e.g., Chi, 2021; Burgos, 2022; Cabrera, 2023), even purposeful initiatives by fellow university students such as the internationally recognized “community pantries” have been branded as “communist” activity by state forces which led to its temporary closure (Kusuma, 2022). See, politically inconvenient people are disposed of even if they are the ones fighting for the interest of the marginalized sectors. While the students have longed slammed campus militarization to make the institution as a safe space, there is a need to establish clearer policies towards any form of harassment on students’ political stands and privacy violation. External collaboration with human rights organizations and employing legal assistance can aid in reassuring the safety of affected students. This is crucial since many of these condemned students are baselessly accused. University administrators should have a mission of building trust, exhibiting openness and transparency, and demonstrating accountability when engaging with its students.

A university is only as good as its constituents. Taking into consideration the political instability and socioeconomic disparities present in developing countries, other state universities may face similar problems when it comes to student action. Re-energizing the bond between universities and their student body begins by acknowledging that there must be intersectional cooperation from both actors to build social momentum and commitment in serving the nation. As much as universities stand with our students in this crucial stage of reimagining our realities, society’s progress can only be achieved by fostering an environment where the students who serve the country can become partners towards meaningful progress. It is through the marriage of political will and social momentum combined with financial support that we can fully strengthen academic freedom. In the end, honor and excellence aren’t just an act, but habits we must persevere for, and amidst it all we must keep the fire burning to be the torch that light up the future.

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'I hereby certify that the above essay is entirely my own work and that I have acknowledged any reference that I have made to other work.'



Electronic Signature

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